FORUM

The Adirondacks Demonstrate the Restoration Thesis

By SUSAN M. PARRILLO

Abstract

"The Adirondacks Demonstrate the Restoration Thesis" explores the proposition that environmental restoration is the only acceptable alternative to a world left with diminishing natural regions. The article reviews the ethical debate concerning the moral obligation of humankind to restore regions that have been stripped of their resources. It demonstrates that through the assistance of both legislative and technological measures nature can be renewed to spawn healthy ecosystems when permitted to do so. Furthermore, the article claims that the restoration thesis is proven by the paradigm of the Adirondack region — a region that was once clear-cut and enabled to restore itself through both rewilding and the "Forever Wild" clause in the New York State Constitution. The article is particularly timely and provocative given the Bush Administration's environmental policies.

I have had the good fortune of living in the southernmost part of the Adirondacks for nearly a decade. Continually awestruck by the beauty of their wilderness, I have often ventured north to enjoy the mountains. Imagine my shock when, just this year, I learned that what appeared to me as a pristine and natural forest was, in fact, at one time nearly completely devastated by the timber, iron, and tannery industries. In the latter part of the 19th century, over one million trees were 'harvested' and sent down the Hudson River each year. Thus, the woods I so admire are not the old-growth forests they seem (to my untrained eye). Rather, these woods are the product of an environmental restoration project started just a little more than a century ago when these mountains were deemed 'Forever Wild' in the New York State Constitution. The success story of rewilding the Adirondacks leads me to ponder the debate among environmental ethicists concerning the restoration of human-devastated wilderness regions.

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Wilderness that has been destroyed, exploited for its resources, and then restored is sometimes called 'fake nature.' It is nature created by technology and legislative measures, rather than solely by natural processes. For some, fake nature is less valued and less appealing than 'real nature.' However, when preservation is not feasible, either politically or practically, or when damage has already occurred, fake nature *is* preferable to its alternative: no nature.

Debates concerning restoration are currently of particular interest, especially given the Bush Administration's inexplicably poor track record where environmental issues are concerned. To cite a mere few examples, the Administration has rewritten laws to enable the Forest Service to double logging in the Western Forests and triple logging in the Sierra Nevada Forests. In so doing, the Administration has concurrently weakened decades old rules that protect the wildlife within the forests (NRDC 2005). It seems as though the precise aim of the current Administration is to extract resources with no reverence for wilderness, leaving us with the worse alternative possible: no nature. The restoration thesis comes to the forefront of our attention because, despite its devaluation, fake nature *does* provide an ecosystem, albeit an artificial one, to non-human species and provides a starting point from which that ecosystem can flourish. Therefore, humans are morally obligated to attempt to restore nature after its exploitation.

Favoring preservation, some environmental ethicists argue that restoration is ineffective, that fake nature has no value, and claim it a moral mistake to attempt to restore nature. Their arguments are, however, anthropocentric, inconsistent, and misguided. Their arguments do not serve preservation. Rather, they only stop environmental restoration after exploitation has occurred. The abandonment of an environmental restoration ethic and policy will lead to the devastation of planetary health, adversely affecting all species and ecosystems globally.

In his article, "Faking Nature," Robert Elliot describes what he calls the "restoration thesis." The restoration thesis is the process whereby human beings exploit a wilderness area, destroy the ecosystem, and harvest its natural resources. After the project concludes, environmental managers work to restore the area to its original condition. In the case of clear-cutting forests, the managers

might recommend replanting, soil retention and other restoration projects. After a mountain is strip-mined, they might recommend restoring landforms and reintroducing plant and animal species. Modern technology allows us to closely replicate what nature built over thousands or, in some cases, millions of years. The application of the restoration thesis creates what Elliot refers to as 'fake nature' (Elliot 382).

Both Elliot in "Faking Nature" and Eric Katz in his article, "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature," argue against the restoration thesis as sound environmental policy. Each argues that fake nature is less valuable than real nature. First, they contend, fake nature is a mere forgery, which Elliot claims is analogous to art forgery. Second, they claim the point of origin of the nature is lost. Third, they argue that technology and legislation can never adequately repair or reconstruct a damaged natural ecosystem. Finally, they argue that the restoration thesis is merely a way of undermining preservationists' arguments against proposed projects that would devastate the ecosystem.

Fake nature *is* less valuable than authentic nature. To claim otherwise would be disingenuous. Both Elliot and Katz make this point effectively in their articles. Inauthentic things are, by their nature, less valuable than the original, authentic item. As Elliot illustrates, this is true with genuine art and forged art. It is also true of diamonds and cubic zirconias. There are myriad examples. Humans cherish authenticity. There is often a negative visceral reaction to inauthentic nature. Many people will admire a beautiful lake or pond and, upon learning it was man-made, find their admiration replaced by disappointment. Perhaps, as Elliot suggests, a forgery is less valuable than an original, lacking as it does its historical origins. Perhaps we instinctively sense that the scenery is less than pure. We cherish the origin of nature. A mountain landscape created over millions of years creates in us a sense of awe and wonder. For many, when the point of origin is a team of environmental engineers, a few dozen bulldozers and planted trees, that sense of awe is lost.

Can humans perfectly restore nature, making it whole? We cannot. In our claims-conscious, litigious society, we have definite ideas about what it means to be made whole and we apply these ideas when we talk about making nature whole. Even in a court of law, being made whole does not usually mean a full restoration. One who loses money seldom recovers all of it. One who loses a limb cannot be awarded a new arm. The idea of being made whole is, in reality, a misnomer. One can only expect to be made *mostly* whole or *partly* whole for, once traumatic loss occurs, it is seldom possible to completely return to the state before the loss. The same principle applies to the traumatic disruption of nature. Once destroyed, nature can never be truly made whole by the hands of humans. But it *can* be restored in part.

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Technology, in conjunction with laws that protect land and demands restoration, can assist Mother Nature in recovering from systemic devastation. After the clear-cutting of the Adirondacks, it would have taken Mother Nature thousands of years to replace the old-growth forest ecosystem. With the aid of technology and the creation of the Park, the Adirondacks now seem virtually mature in just a generation or two. Though the restored forest is not as complex as the destroyed old-growth forest, nature has found a new balance, and produced a thriving ecosystem. Conservationist Bill McKibben states, "Most of the creatures that should be here are filtering back in...wolves...mountain lions...Beaver are back, creating new wetlands everywhere. Turkey, bear, moose, you name it. It's a real testament to the fact that the natural world wants to push back up through our overlay" (Ives/McKibben interview).

Those who would destroy a natural habitat to extract resources often propose the restoration thesis. Katz claims this is a way of undermining the arguments and objections of environmentalists who oppose the project. Because the appeasement is seen as subterfuge, environmentalists oppose the restoration thesis. Arguing against restoration policy is a mistake and the arguments made are unconvincing. Environmentalists who oppose restoration maintain that their true interest is the fight *for* preservation, not *against* restoration. As Katz states, "[With restoration] we are putting a piece of furniture over our stain in the carpet, for it provides a better appearance. As a matter of policy, however, it would be much more significant to prevent the cause of the stains" (Katz 396). The arguments used are unconvincing because they target the wrong problem.

The true goals of the environmentalist are preservation and conservation. Rather than arguing for their true goals and, hence, accomplishing anything productive in terms of achieving them, the effect of their arguments against restoration serves only to undermine the restoration process in conservation while aiding preservation not one whit. Furthermore, many arguments offered are not ethically defensible.

In the first place, many arguments made against restoration are anthropocentric. Elliot discusses the value of real nature and real art over forgeries (382-384). He reviews the human perspective of the world and what is valuable to

humans. He discusses human appreciation of aesthetics and humans' recreational land use. Nowhere does he present an argument based on any intrinsic, non-human-derived value of nature. Katz's argument against restoration, in which he discusses the value of nature over the value of an artifact, is equally anthropocentric (Katz 394). He, too, poses arguments that regard only human valuation. Neither article addresses ecosystem health, biodiversity, animal habitats, or species preservation. They speak only of land that is made less valuable to humans.

Additionally, environmentalists' arguments against restoration, based on aesthetics, are a classically weak basis for an ethical argument and cannot guarantee lasting protection for the environment. Aesthetics are entirely anthropocentric, based as they are on the subjective experience of a human viewer. Future generations of humans may well find fake nature more aesthetically appealing than real nature. They may find it cleaner, safer, or more accessible like the Adirondacks of today compared to the 'howling wilderness' it was once considered.

The weakness of the aesthetics argument is also seen in Elliot's article, in which he states that it is morally permissible to restore *barren* nature (Elliot 384). Whatever environmental ethic is derived, it should be universally applicable. Elliot finds it acceptable to restore natural areas that are bankrupt or barren. Here, 'bad' or 'ugly' nature is taken and made 'rich' and 'beautiful.' In contrast, to take 'good' nature that is already 'rich,' extract minerals from it, and then restore it is unacceptable. One wonders whether the concern is for *nature* and for the preservation of that which is *natural,* or whether it is merely surrounding *humans* with beauty. If naturalness itself is the primary value, then land that is naturally barren should be valued equally with beautiful nature. It is equally natural and, therefore, equally valuable. Any lesser standard relies upon subjective, anthropocentric aesthetics.

Current environmental issues spawned by the Bush Administration make arguments against the restoration thesis even more fallacious. Moreover, the same issues strengthen the arguments in favor of the restoration thesis. Preservation cannot last indefinitely. Eventually, the pressures of global population growth and the ensuing demand for natural resources will overwhelm the perceived aesthetic value of any wilderness area containing untapped resources. If the nation were to deplete all other sources for timber, no environmental argument would protect the forests of the Adirondacks because we believe we 'need' wood for so many of our creature comforts. Human beings are unlikely to give up the comforts to which they are accustomed at the behest of environmental concerns. Assuming that preservation efforts cannot succeed *ad infinitum* and that resources *will eventually* be extracted, restoration is a necessary part of environmental policy. Restoration, or 'fake nature,' is the only available alternative to *no nature whatsoever* in situations where wilderness will be disturbed despite the environmental consequences. Although the restoration thesis is a compromise, it is the only available alternative path to the continuation of planetary health (Katz 396).

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We must concede, as Roderick Nash argues, that all landscape is to some degree synthetic, simply because of man's hegemony over nature. All landscape is what it is either because man made it that way or because man made a conscious choice to leave it that way (Nash 1). No reforestation program can restore denuded wilderness to its would-be state had it been left untouched. In a generation or two, reforestation cannot recreate old growth forests – with the same microbial soil ecology – which may take thousands of years to evolve naturally. No technological advancement or miracle of modern environmental engineering can replant hemlock groves as perfectly as nature.

As the Adirondacks can attest, a restored mountainous region of forests and groves is demonstrably more valuable to humankind and most other species than a region that has been annihilated: left as thousands of acres of rotting tree stumps, its soil eroding further with every rain, disastrously affecting the entire watershed. There are many examples of people regularly accepting inauthentic nature – often unbeknownst to them. In fact, most prefer fake nature to no nature or bad nature. Becoming aware that the Adirondacks represent a success story of the restoration thesis does not cause me to value them less or to turn away in disappointment or revulsion. To the contrary, I am, instead, more deeply enamored with the Park and with the awesome power of nature to restore itself – to heal – when given the chance to do so. More importantly, this 'fake nature' has created habitats for non-human species and once again contributes to global health and longevity.

Restoration is a moral obligation that humans owe to the environment and to the global community. Humans must attempt the restorative process. We must

acknowledge our negative impact on nature and attempt to right what we make so dramatically wrong. Katz writes, "It is a policy that makes the best of a bad situation; it cleans up our mess...it is a compromise that makes the best of a bad situation" (Katz 395-396). It is the best that we can offer the world and our fellow creatures. We need an environmental policy that first treasures and seeks preservation, but that is also unafraid to embrace a policy of environmental restoration when preservation fails or is improbable. It is our moral obligation to other species to do what we can to recreate the land we destroy — an obligation we undertake when we disturb their habitat.

The wilderness ecosystems found in the once denuded Adirondack forest are a testament to the validity of the restoration thesis. They prove what environmentalists most likely do not want known: that, with human assistance, nature *can* heal and robust ecosystems *can* be resuscitated. In fact, this recovered region ought to be held up as the paradigm of what occurs when preservation efforts fail and a policy of environmental restoration is in place. McKibben claims, "[The Adirondacks are] the best example on Earth of an ecosystem that hit bottom and has begun to recover" (Ives/McKibben interview). He further states, "It's the world's biggest experiment in eco-restoration. One hundred years ago it was all clear-cut, now it's a beautiful forest. Nature has an ability to replenish itself" (McKibben, *New Statesman*).

Nature that has been devastated and restored is often deemed less valuable and less appealing to humans. It lacks the historical origin that humans so revere. Though we cannot completely restore land which has been disturbed and exploited, technological advances have made it possible to restore many areas well enough to support viable ecosystems. It is therefore morally obligatory for environmental policy to demand such restorations. David Brower once wrote, "When you are standing at the edge of an abyss, the only progressive step you can make is a step backwards." When land is barren because humans made it that way, we have a responsibility and obligation to take a step back and make the best possible restitution to nature, its ecosystems, and inhabitants. Preservation may not last forever, and under the approach of the Bush Administration, it may not last more than a couple of decades. Recognizing this, environmental ethicists *must* defend the restoration thesis as a necessary part of global health and longevity. Environmental restoration is the only step backward that we can take to repair nature's losses, and it is the only suitable alternative to a world with no nature at all. As for me, the next time I stand atop Mt. Marcy, I will look at the sprawling mountains and forests below me, stupefied by their beauty and their extraordinary response to the "Forever Wild" clause which allowed them to renew themselves, and I will feel grateful that the legislature of two generations ago had the fortitude to employ a restoration policy and save the Adirondacks.

"Although the restoration thesis is a compromise, it is the only available alternative path to the continuation of planetary health."

BURDETTE PARKS

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